

For Knowledge, Look Within **Businesses are discovering the value of internal infomediaries.**

By Daniel Costello

The disjunction between company employees and company knowledge hasn't always been so acute. A business is, after all, a community of sorts, and every community has librarians, chroniclers, sages and gossips. But as the speed of business has accelerated, the tolerance for delay in getting information has shrunk almost to the vanishing point.

This demand for immediate access to relevant knowledge has given rise to a new business role: the internal infomediary, who creates or manages systems to connect employees with the knowledge they need. Infomediaries may bear any of a range of titles and may not be designated on the org chart as knowledge controllers; what matters is what they do. "Their responsibility is to keep their finger on the pulse of the knowledge flowing around the organization," says Stacie Capshaw, senior analyst with the Delphi Group in Boston.

Not long ago, the trend in enterprise information flow was toward disintermediation. The promise of new technologies such as intranets, collaborative groupware, workflow management and search tools was that people would gain direct access to the knowledge sources they needed, bypassing traditional conduits and intermediate layers (or "middlemen") within an organization.

But direct access by everyone to everything hasn't proven to be a panacea. "You can get a lot of information off of the Internet," says David Bender, executive director of the Special Libraries Association in Washington, D.C., "but how you're going to distill that information so that you can use it becomes a problem." Bender argues that even if the right information is found but not in an easily usable form, the employee is likely to bypass it and go on.

What users need is a knowledge infomediary: someone who knows what the company does, where knowledge resides within it and in what forms that knowledge may be valuable in contributing to the bottom line. "Anyone who can take and analyze, evaluate, package and disseminate information in this useful fashion is going to give somebody a business advantage," says Bender.

These working knowledge partnerships represent a step forward. "If you look at the evolution of information professionals, some time ago it was, Just in case you need this information, we have it available. Then it went to just in time; we would give it to you whenever you needed but not have it always available. Then it became just for you.

Now it has become just with you,'" says Bender. Instead of merely providing an infrastructure for tapping into knowledge, infomediaries work proactively to understand the informational needs of individuals and cooperate with them to achieve business goals.

Infomediaries are not necessarily limited to chief learning or knowledge officers or formal members of a knowledge management team. IBM's Institute for Knowledge Management (IKM) in Cambridge, Mass., recently examined this emerging role. "We looked at 13 or 14 different jobs, and they had diverse names, diverse industries and diverse kinds of surface descriptions: 'learning supporter' at GM, 'knowledge steward' at Arthur D. Little, 'relationship manager' at IBM and so on," says Joseph Horvath, a senior consultant and research manager at IKM.

Three kinds of help

The researchers did identify common denominators that help clarify what the occupants of these various positions do. "It boils down to three categories that we call stewards, brokers and researchers," says Horvath. By understanding these segments, companies can begin to understand how to identify the appropriate infomediary for their organization.

The primary infomediary role of a knowledge steward, explains Horvath, is to collect, analyze and organize tacit knowledge held by individuals within an organization, which may be a team, a department or a whole company. Rather than working one-on-one to fill individual needs for information, stewards act as observers—watching what people are doing and interviewing individuals—to uncover and translate tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. A steward might, for example, interview a sales representative after he or she completes a large deal to develop a best practices story from which others can learn. Stewards also act as evangelists to market the value of knowledge sharing and encourage everyone to contribute information and utilize the KM systems. In this sense, the chief knowledge officer is an executive-level steward.

Many companies have found that they can't just throw technology at the problem of capturing and sharing information and expect people to use the system. Instead, it takes a commitment to making sure the content in the KM system stays current and relevant. Horvath points out that if you develop a collection of lessons learned or best practices, somebody should have responsibility, even part-time, to manage and nurture that repository. "When usage starts to drop off, that person can remind and cajole users and make sure that the content stays fresh and gets routed to the people who have the necessary expertise to evaluate its quality," he says.

Rather than focusing on capturing or codifying knowledge, knowledge brokers have a more direct connection to knowledge seekers and project teams. "The dominant function is establishing connections between individuals to achieve the transfer of tacit knowledge one-to-one," says Horvath. In other words, brokers connect individuals so they learn from each other, converting tacit knowledge into value for the company. Approachability, credibility, experience within the company, personal networking skills and responsiveness characterize successful knowledge brokers. For example, a broker might be a partner at a consulting firm who responds informally to inquiries from consultants within the firm about a given area of practice with suggestions or pointers to sources of information and instances of best practices.

Brokers facilitate information sharing to accomplish specific business goals. For example, at Viant Corp., a digital business consulting firm based in Boston, knowledge brokers are half of a combined "high-tech, high-touch" approach to knowledge management. "The high-tech component is a knowledge management system and processes," says Chris Newell, Viant's chief knowledge officer. "The high-touch component is these roles we call project catalysts." Rather than waiting passively for someone to come to them, project catalysts are integrated with business teams. This role was designed for active, experienced people who work with teams throughout a project's life cycle. They help with everything from identifying skills and expertise a team already has or may need when launching a new project through ensuring that knowledge is captured and deposited in a knowledge repository.

The third major intermediary role is the knowledge researcher, whose primary function, according to Horvath, is to search for, retrieve and deliver explicit knowledge residing primarily outside the business. This role tends to mix knowledge of the business with research and retrieval skills. A good knowledge researcher exhibits the desire to help others, strong online search capabilities, knowledge of the industry and general intellectual curiosity. This area features corporate librarians and records managers, although there are some differences between the two as they apply to knowledge intermediation.

Records management, explains Delphi's Capshaw, typically looks at how we categorize information and how we build taxonomies to classify records. Librarians tend to focus on "requirements analysis" as well as search and retrieval. They are trained to help someone figure out what they need (as opposed to what they might be asking for), where the information is and how to present it in the most useful package.

Able to change

A successful infomediary also adapts to changing environments and evolving needs. "When you look at the profile of someone who is working effectively as a knowledge leader, regardless of what their background is, it's the ability to become a chameleon," says Capshaw. An infomediary may have to fill multiple functions in a single day. For instance, in one meeting he or she may discuss the records management needs of a particular team, but in another present an IT perspective. At another time, the infomediary might have to talk about how the company evaluates and acquires external publications. So even though many infomediaries come from areas of specialization, they have to be able to generalize and maintain an overview perspective.

The Delphi Group recently found that successful infomediaries have been with their organization at least 10 years and exhibit a passion for knowledge management. "If you think about it, it takes a fairly extroverted person, day-in and day-out, to be talking to people about knowledge," says Capshaw. "You have to find somebody who has the subject matter expertise as well as the personality to do a good job at this. It's almost a knowledge management marketing function." For that reason, she says, few knowledge leaders are hired from the outside. Even when these jobs are advertised, they're more likely to be filled from within the organization.

It can be difficult to attract good people to this role. To begin with, those with expertise are in demand. Some people won't want to go into roles that they perceive as having no status. They may wonder whether this new role in the corporation is an advance or leads to a career dead-end and whether there is a path out if problems arise. A scientist, for example, might see no advantage in being pulled from his or her core competencies in the lab to spend part of the day helping others advance their own research.

Viant tries to promote acceptance of the infomediary role. It begins by choosing knowledge catalysts who are respected, fairly senior individuals who convey status to this role. Second, their tenure is temporary. "We do it by rotation. We don't want them to come in and stay in this enterprise role," says Newell. The short term not only makes the position more palatable for senior executives, it builds an understanding and acceptance of what infomediaries when more people experience this role.

Facilitating technology

The proliferation of internal portals is enabling direct access to many types of information. While the self-service model may appear to obviate the need for intermediation, the two actually are complementary. A well-designed knowledge portal can support and

enhance the human role by providing easy, timely answers to routine or standardized information. At the same time, the infomediary is skilled at ensuring that these tools provide what the knowledge employees need. As part of a team developing a knowledge-base portal, infomediaries can draw upon their expertise and resources to facilitate the collection, categorization, repackaging and presentation of relevant knowledge.

In reality, though, such portals are limited. Most knowledge doesn't lend itself to being codified in technology. "We believe that when we finish building or rebuilding a system—even if it's the most advanced system you could imagine, with expertise location capability and incredible searching ability—80 percent of the knowledge is still tacit," says Viant's Newell.

In this murky environment, human infomediaries can shine. They make the connections to tacit knowledge and can set up formal as well as informal channels to translate it into explicit knowledge. They collect, evaluate and repackage tacit knowledge to give everyone access, and they facilitate the transfer of experiences and insights directly between individuals. "They have knowledge mostly in their heads about where there are similarities across the organization—not only where it is, but who is more inclined to share it," says Capshaw.

Determining value

To date, estimates of return on investment (ROI) in knowledge intermediaries have been nebulous. Historically, information technology has gotten the upper hand with management because its costs and ROI are easier to identify. As knowledge infomediaries find a higher profile, their value should become easier to quantify.

Capshaw notes that libraries and records centers have struggled to maintain their budgets as IT is introduced, but that situation may change. "In this information age, I think people are acknowledging there is more to it than sticking a Web browser on your desktop," she says. "There is usually a curve organizations go through of Why do we need intermediaries? We have the Web. We have Yahoo. We have Alta Vista. We can do our own searching. Then the organization usually comes full circle and says, What are we doing? We are not paying engineers to surf the Web all day."

Businesses are beginning to discover that the next point on this curve is internal infomediaries. They perform a variety of functions, such as acting as a knowledge steward, broker or researcher, and possess a range of skills from personal networking, listening and trustworthiness to online search, content management and experience with the firm. But common among all infomediaries is the ability to

connect employees with the knowledge they need, whether that knowledge resides in another person, an internal knowledge repository or a database far away.